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AUTHOR Imel, Susan
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ABSTRACT

Reflective practice is a mode that integrates thought and action with reflection. Learning is dependent upon the integration of experience with reflection and of theory with practice. Experience is a basis for learning but reflection is the essential part of the learning process because it results in making sense or extracting meaning from the experience. The stage is set for reflection when "knowing-in-action" produces an unexpected outcome. This outcome can lead to "reflection-on-action" or "reflection-in-action." Reflective practice has both advantages and disadvantages: it can positively affect professional growth but is time consuming and may involve personal risk. Engaging in practice requires both knowledge of practice and awareness of professional and personal philosophy. Because programs take place in settings characterized by ambiguity, complexity, variety, and conflicting values, educators must make choices about the nature of practice problems and how to solve them. The essence of effective practice in adult education is the ability to reflect in action. Reflective practice can be a tool for revealing discrepancies between espoused theories and theories-in-use. The DATA process, which helps engage individuals in reflective practices, consists of four steps: describe, analyze, theorize, and act. (13 references) (NLA)

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DIGEST
NO. 122

Reflective Practice in Adult Education

by Susan Imel

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Increasingly, the term *reflective practice* is appearing in the vocabulary of adult education. Based on the notion that skills cannot be acquired in isolation from context, the reflective practice movement has emerged as a reaction to technical and competency based strategies common in the 1970s (Rose 1992). This ***ERIC Digest*** examines reflective practice in adult education. First, the concept is defined, including its strengths and weaknesses. Then, the relevance of reflective practice to adult education is discussed. Suggested strategies for becoming more reflective in practice conclude the digest.

Reflective Practice Defined and Described

Reflective practice is a mode that integrates or links thought and action with reflection. It involves thinking about and critically analyzing one's actions with the goal of improving one's professional practice. Engaging in reflective practice requires individuals to assume the perspective of an external observer in order to identify the assumptions and feelings underlying their practice and then to speculate about how these assumptions and feelings affect practice (Kottkamp 1990; Osterman 1990; Peters 1991). According to Peters (ibid., p. 95), "[it] is a special kind of practice . . . [that] involves a systematic inquiry into the practice itself."

Educators have become familiar with the concept of reflective practice through Donald Schön's (1983, 1988) writings about reflective practitioners. Schön's work has an historical foundation in a tradition of learning supported by Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget, each of whom advocated that learning is dependent upon the integration of experience with reflection and of theory with practice. Although each argued that experience is the basis for learning, they also maintained that learning cannot take place without reflection. In reflective practice, *reflection* is the essential part of the learning process because it results in making sense of or extracting meaning from the experience (Osterman 1990).

According to Schön (1988), the stage is set for reflection when "knowing-in-action"--the sort of knowledge that professionals come to depend on to perform their work spontaneously--produces an unexpected outcome or surprise. This surprise can lead to one of two kinds of reflection: reflection on action, which occurs either following or by interrupting the activity, or reflection in action, which occurs during (without interrupting) the activity by thinking about how to reshape the activity while it is underway.

Kottkamp (1990) uses the terms "offline" and "online" to distinguish between reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection-on-action takes place after the activity (i.e., offline), when full attention can be given to analysis without the necessity for immediate action and when there is opportunity for the professional to receive assistance from others in analyzing the event. Reflection-in-action, which occurs during the event, may be more effective in improving practice. It results in online experiments to adjust and improve actions even though it requires simultaneous attention to the behavior and the analysis as if from an external perspective. Schön (1983) states that when reflecting in action, a professional becomes a researcher in the context of practice, freed from established theory and techniques and able to construct a new theory to fit the unique situation.

Before professionals' theories or ideas about practice can be changed, they must be identified. However, in skillful knowing-in-action much of the "skillful action reveals a 'knowing more than we can say,'" a tacit knowledge (Schön 1983, p. 51). In other words, professionals are not able to describe what they do to accomplish an activity. However, Osterman (1990) maintains that an important part of reflective practice is developing the ability to articulate that tacit knowledge in order to share professional skills and enhance the body of professional knowledge.

The values, assumptions, and strategies supporting theories and ideas about practice need to be examined. If this clarification does not occur, professionals may find themselves in the position of espousing one theory but using another in practice, that is, their actions are not consistent with their intent. In reflective practice, professionals can expose their actions to critical assessment to discover the values and assumptions underlying their practice. As professionals become more aware of their theories-in-use, they become more conscious of the contradictions between what they do and what they hope to do (Osterman 1990; Schön 1988).

Reflective practice has both advantages and disadvantages. It can positively affect professional growth and development by leading to greater self-awareness, to the development of new knowledge about professional practice, and to a broader understanding of the problems that confront practitioners (Osterman 1990). However, it is a time-consuming process and it may involve personal risk because the questioning of practice requires that practitioners be open to an examination of beliefs, values, and feelings about which there may be great sensitivity (Peters 1991; Rose 1992).

Engaging in reflective practice requires both knowledge of practice and awareness of professional and personal philosophy. Reflection without an understanding of the rules or techniques that constitute good practice may lead to a repetition of mistakes, whereas reflection without philosophical awareness can lead to a preoccupation with technique (Lasley 1989). Schön (1988) suggests that professionals learn to reflect in action by first learning to recognize and apply standard practice rules and techniques, then to reason from general rules to problematic cases characteristic of the profession, and only then to develop and test new forms of understanding and action when familiar patterns of doing things fail.

The Role of Reflective Practice in Adult Education

In adult education, as in most other professions, there are many prescriptions for effective practice, and professionals are perceived as having specialized expertise that they apply to problems in well-defined practice situations. In reality, however, adult education programs take place in settings that

are characterized by a great deal of ambiguity, complexity, variety, and conflicting values that make unique demands on the adult educator's skills and knowledge. As a result, adult educators are constantly making choices about the nature of practice problems and how to solve them (Cervero 1988, 1989).

Cervero (1988) maintains that the essence of effective practice in adult education is the ability to reflect-in-action. Adult educators must be able to change ill-defined practice situations into those in which they are more certain about the most appropriate course of action to pursue. They must engage in reflective practice and use their "repertoire of past experiences . . . to make sense of the current situation" (p. 157), conducting spontaneous experiments in order to decide on appropriate courses of action.

Reflective practice in adult education can also be a tool for revealing discrepancies between espoused theories (what we say we do) and theories-in-use (what we actually do). For example, the andragogical model and its four underlying assumptions has been widely adopted by adult educators with one result being the assumption that teaching adults should differ from teaching children and adolescents. However, a summary (Imel 1989) of research investigating these differences revealed that although teachers perceive adults as being different, these perceptions do not automatically translate into differences in approaches to teaching.

Strategies for Reflective Practice

Engaging in reflective practice takes time and effort but the rewards can be great. The following list summarizes reflective practice processes (Roth 1989):

- Questioning what, why, and how one does things and asking what, why, and how others do things
- Seeking alternatives
- Keeping an open mind
- Comparing and contrasting
- Seeking the framework, theoretical basis, and/or underlying rationale
- Viewing from various perspectives
- Asking "what if . . .?"
- Asking for others' ideas and viewpoints
- Using prescriptive models only when adapted to the situation
- Considering consequences
- Hypothesizing
- Synthesizing and testing
- Seeking, identifying, and resolving problems

Fortunately, there are a number of resources available for those interested in developing habits of reflective practice. For example, Peters (1991, pp. 91-95) describes a process called DATA that consists of four steps: describe, analyze, theorize, and act. First, the problem, task, or incident representing some critical aspect of practice that the practitioner desires to change is described. For example, a teacher may wish to become less directive and more collaborative in her instructional processes. In the DATA model, she would identify the context in which instruction takes place, how she feels about the directive approach, and reasons for changing it.

Next, through analysis, she would identify factors that contribute to her current directive approach. An important part of this stage is to identify the assumptions that support this approach and bring to light underlying beliefs, rules, and motives governing teaching and learning. Here, the teacher can uncover the theory behind her directive approach.

The third step of the DATA process involves theorizing about alternative ways of approaching teaching by taking the theory derived from the previous step and developing it into a new one. In this step, the teacher is developing an espoused theory to govern her new, collaborative approach.

Finally, she will act and try out her new theory. The goal of this step will be to minimize any discrepancies between the espoused theory and the theory in use, but this will only occur through further thought and reflection.

Additional sources that contain strategies to help adult educators become more reflective in practice are Brookfield's (1988) work on critical thinking and Mezirow's (1990) on fostering critical reflectivity. Although more general, Kottkamp (1990) also contains strategies for "sparking, facilitating, and sustaining reflection at various levels and preparatory stages of professional practice" (p. 182). These resources can help adult educators approach their practice in a reflective manner and deal more effectively with a field characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and variety.

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CENTER ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
1900 KENNY ROAD • COLUMBUS, OHIO 43210
Telephone: (614) 292-4353 or (800) 848-4815